

The Quakers and Their War of Resistance

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When the Civil War began, many people of different religious faiths supported the Confederate war effort. A number of Protestant ministers even served in the military. Yet, one religious group—the Quakers—went against majority opinion and refused to support the war.

From the early years of the North Carolina colony, the Quakers, or Society of Friends, held certain beliefs that differed from those of the other colonists. They believed in pacifism—that war and violence were wrong. They considered any service in the colony's militia, or even supporting it through taxes, to be unethical.

Quakers also held a basic belief in human equality. They thought women were equal to men. They did not hate the Native Americans as most of the other colonists did. Even though many of the early Friends owned slaves, the practice of slavery began to become a moral problem for the Quakers. At first, they tried to decrease the harsh treatment of slaves. Later, a movement began in the faith to free all the slaves whom the Quakers held in bondage. By the early 1800s, the Quakers had become devoted abolitionists and helped slaves to escape through the Underground Railroad, a secret network that aimed to transport slaves to free states or territories.

In the 1830s, Friends began to face increased hostility and harassment because most young Quaker men refused to serve in the state's militia. Other citizens viewed this refusal as one of disloyalty and treason. Friends actively supported manumission, or freedom, societies, which also contributed to their unpopularity. And, overall, they did not want to live in a slave-based society. Over the years, nearly 10,000 Quakers left North Carolina and moved to the West, where more opportunity awaited them and where the states did not practice slavery. By 1845 about 4,500 Friends still remained in the state.

When a civil war became evident, Quakers again began leaving the state. Since many Friends had already moved to the West, some of the North Carolina Quaker families decided to join their western relatives until the war ended. When the state's authorities noticed the number of Quakers trying to leave North Carolina, they moved to stop them when they could.

According to *Hiram Hilty in By Land and by Sea*, the Quakers who remained in North Carolina faced a huge crisis. They still opposed war and violence, and they did not want to fight to preserve slavery.

To escape being forced to fight for the Confederacy, Quaker men of military draft age often hid out in the woods or headed northward over the mountains to Union territory. The Confederate officials tried to draft all able young men to serve in the military to meet the government's needs.

The officials did not care if the young men believed in war or not. Government officials had excused Quakers from military service since colonial times, but the new Confederacy was not as flexible.

In 1862 the Confederate Congress did enact a five-hundred-dollar exemption fee, which many Quakers paid, but some did not. Payment of this fee excused a person from military service. In 1864 the Quakers also received approval to perform certain types of work as a substitute for military service. One type of service was working at the saltworks in Wilmington. Another was laboring in the leather tanning and shoe industries, which Quakers owned. Some Quakers refused to perform any type of substitute service because they did not want to contribute to the war effort in any way.

Some non-Quakers came to embrace the Quaker faith because they respected the Friends' firm rejection of both war and slavery. These non-Quakers became known as War Quakers.

Some Friends suffered mental and physical abuse during the war. Young Quaker men drafted into the Confederate army had to tolerate harassment from fellow soldiers, who assumed that the Quakers were loyal to the Union and favored the freedom of all people.

Thomas Kennedy was a sixty-six-year-old Quaker civilian who had liberated his slaves to Haiti many years before the war. Confederate authorities wrongly convicted Kennedy of treason. They sent him to Salisbury Prison, which held political prisoners as well as military prisoners. Kennedy endured abuse at Salisbury and later at a Confederate prison in Richmond, Virginia. When he arrived in Indiana after being exchanged for another prisoner, he died within a few days in the home of fellow Friends.

During the war, Quaker farmers suffered through farm raids by both the Union and Confederate armies. The soldiers stole horses, cattle, chickens, stores of grain, and other items. Food and clothing became scarce. On farms where Quaker men were drafted, the women and children left behind had to try to work the fields. Families faced malnutrition and hunger. When possible, Quaker civilians helped people in need, sometimes serving as a refuge for men not willing to fight.

By the war's end, the Quakers left in North Carolina numbered around two thousand. Though they had suffered for their beliefs, they ultimately had realized the dream that all people be set free.

**At the time of this article's publication, Doris McLean Bates worked as a historical publications editor at the North Carolina Museum of History. She was editor of Tar Heel Junior Historian and other Tar Heel Junior Historian Association materials.*